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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes that a general framework of moral education, namely Thomas Green's "voices of conscience" can provide a starting point for exploring the role of moral education in museums. The first part of the paper summarizes Green's framework and discusses how that framework can be applied to education in museums. The second part of the paper suggests an approach, based on John G.Thompson's interpretative methodology, for empirically examining moral messages created by museums. The study suggests that museums generate moral messages as part of their educative role. The paper states these frameworks can be a starting point for further investigations about the role of museums as places for moral education. (EH)

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A Framework for Museums' Role in Moral Education

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A Framework for Museums' Role in Moral Education

Introduction

What should the role of museums be in our society's effort to provide opportunities for lifelong learning? Museums are social institutions committed to the interpretation of artifacts to the general public, and so they are, in essence, educative entities (American Association of Museums, 1992). Museums also have a cultural mission, and this implies that their educative role is not neutral but laden with values (Rabinow, 1984). Museums, we argue, therefore have an important moral dimension and convey moral messages. This paper proposes that a general framework of moral education, namely Thomas Green's "voices of conscience," can provide a starting point for exploring the role of moral education in museums. We believe that having such a framework can provide a way for the museum community to join the larger conversation about the educative opportunities our society hopes will contribute to all its members' moral development.

In the first part of this paper we will summarize Green's framework and discuss how it applies to education in museums. In the second part, we suggest an approach, based on John B. Thompson's interpretive methodology, for empirically examining moral messages created by museums.

Museum educational practices and Green's framework of moral education

The contemporary educational philosopher Thomas Green's (1984) essay *The Formation of Conscience in an Age of Technology* provides a broadly applicable lens for examining the moral dimensions of educational practices. What follows is first a summary of Green's work and second an analysis of contemporary museum professionals', critics', and theorists' writings on the mission of museums as seen through this lens.

Five voices of conscience.

In his essay, Green lays out a theory of five "voices of conscience" which permeate all aspects of one's life throughout each person's lifetime. These are not separate moral

precepts or principles, but aspects of human morality as a whole.

- Conscience as Craft: This conscience has to do with being able to judge one's own performance, being proud of doing something well, and being embarrassed by doing something poorly. Green suggests that this "sense of craft" may be the basis from which all moral development can be built.
- Conscience as Membership: As Green sees it, conscience is formed only through membership in a social group. In other words, moral education starts with social normation, which then extends to individual morality.
- Conscience as Sacrifice: Green suggests that "morality can enter the picture only when I am willing to sacrifice my self-interest for the interests of others"(Green, 1984, p. 17). The clearest manifestations of this voice are acts which show "self-indifference" and which go beyond the call of duty.
- Conscience as Memory: This voice of conscience is formed through a connection to a cultural tradition. It is through this "rootedness" that we learn to be individuals, family members, and citizens. As Green describes it, exploring and developing conscience as memory is dependent on good stories, and is necessary if we are to have empathy enough to feel connected as fellow humans to people in other cultures.
- Conscience as Imagination: The essence of this voice is the ability to recognize and describe the gap between what we have hoped to achieve and the reality of how far we have progressed. It is through the poetic and artistic expression of this that we can be drawn "out of our presumed world of thought and action... and grant[ed]... the ears to hear, the eyes to see and the courage to act in different ways" (Green, 1984, p. 26).

Museums and the voices of conscience.

Green's theory of the voices of conscience allows us to examine the question, are museums in the business of shaping conscience? Below we attempt to show that museums *are* in the business of shaping conscience and indeed address all five voices of conscience which Green delineated.

Craft. One could think of museums as a celebration of conscience as craft. The manmade objects in museums are generally held up to be exemplary. As such they

may teach us to value certain levels of craftsmanship. But there may be times when a visitor is perplexed -- times when a particular item or display conflicts with their taste and judgement and they may ask themselves, "Why is *that* in the museum?" or "What's so special about that?" We think museums should be encouraging more reflection on such questions. The questions are important, and perhaps the objects that we can least easily justify as "museum-worthy" are the most vital in museums' efforts to foster conscience as craft.

We are certainly not alone in thinking this. Several modern museum thinkers say that there has been a shift from museum objects being presented in rigid taxonomic relationships with other museum objects, to being presented in relation to human beings (Fyfe, 1996; Graburn, 1977; Hooper-Greenhill, 1992).

Membership. As social institutions in communities, museums both reflect and help define membership in social groups. In this way, museums have moral authority in helping to shape a conscience of membership. Therefore, the basic question becomes, what kind of moral authority is sought by museum professionals and what is accorded to museums by visitors? Many have complained that museums of the past were elitist institutions which privilege one (Western, male) view of reality, and they call for museums to provide "an elite experience for everyone" (Zolberg, 1994). There is a strong ideal of democratizing museums and a subtle shift from museums being static resources such that "the public uses and supports museums as sources of personal enjoyment and enlightenment" (Skramstad, 1996) to promoting active involvement with the community by calling for museums to institute, "programs that are responsive to the needs and wishes of our potential constituents" (American Association of Museums, 1992, p. 16).

An even more recent view on the moral authority issue comes from the proceedings of the 1996 Smithsonian-sponsored conference, "Museums for the New Millennium":

> Another key element of specialness is the museum's claim to the expectation of authority. It is in this area where much of the present controversy over the role of museums has been centered. The museum, like most institutions in modern American life, has been, to use Neil Harris' term, deprivileged. Yet, if a museum has no special knowledge, no special perspective or other unique resource, then why is it special? Here museums have truly become the victims of their own

> success. Thirty years ago, most museums would not have claimed the authority to address many of the subjects and topics routinely covered today. Nor, for the most part, would the broad public have taken much notice of it if we had. Today, museums have an assumed authority that makes them vulnerable to attack in the way that any influential source of authority is. Our response to these attacks is too often retreat or arrogance. Properly managing and continuously renegotiating our authority will be a major and time-consuming responsibility of the future. (Skramstad, 1996)

Sacrifice. Museums can cultivate conscience as sacrifice by giving people access to knowledge about things that lie outside, or may even contradict, their self-interest. They can do this through exhibits which explore controversial topics or different cultures, and even through the theme of an entire institution, as in the case of the Holocaust Museum. As Harold Skramstad, Jr., quoted above said, museums are tackling topics they might not have touched thirty years ago. The original plan of the Smithsonian's exhibition of the Enola Gay can be seen as an attempt to present visitors with multiple views of a well-known event, which would enable them to begin thinking about it morally. But, as Vera L. Zolberg says in an essay about "the Enola Gay affair," "museums as we know them are institutions closely intertwined with the collective memory of the nations in which they were created" (Zolberg, 1996, p. 76). It would seem, by the tumult which accompanied this exhibit, that the issues of what to present as "collective memory" are complex. This leads us to the next voice of conscience.

Memory. How do museums promote a sense of rootedness, or a "collective memory"? What are the objectives with which governments or individuals establish museums? One museum theorist sees it this way: "Museums have long served to house a national heritage, thereby creating a national identity that often fulfilled national ambitions" (Kaplan, 1994a, p. 9).

The book that contains this quote has chapters about the founding of museums in Nigeria, Australia, Mexico, Brazil and Israel. In Nigeria the national museums are intended to cultivate a sense of national unity and identity (Kaplan, 1994b). Australian museums began in a manner similar to those in the U.S. with "cabinets of curiosities" generally owned by wealthy individuals or members-only clubs. It was only after World

War II that Australian museums began to address uniquely Australian topics (Anderson & Reeves, 1994). Luis Gerardo Morales-Moreno views the underlying concept of the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City, Mexico, to be "the fatherland" and adds that the Museum "was used politically to legitimize a historical and mythic age, a Prehispanic and profoundly religious Indian past, and the colonial and secular state that was transformed into the independent Mexican nation" (Morales-Moreno, 1994, p. 186). The first Brazilian museum was, as in the U.S. and Australia, based on natural history collections and then on collections amassed during the height of the colonial gold-mining periods. Contemporary museums in Brazil continue to rely upon these collections, indeed when there was a recent proposal to create a new museum, a Brazilian journal argued against the plan by suggesting that "Brazil lacks cultural material" (Dickenson, 1994, p. 243). And, as a final example, in Israel, where the majority of the nation's museums are archaeological, museums played an important role by helping immigrants to the country develop a sense of an Israeli identity.

Imagination. In Green's view, to be moral means that we have visions and dreams. We may be inspired by the visions and dreams of past peoples which are exemplified in the objects they made and the stories they told. As the director of New Guinea's National Museum and Art Gallery put it, "The museum must not be a place where our past is stored and displayed, but must act as an inspiration to our people in the effort to keep our culture alive" (Newton, 1994, p. 273). We think that by "alive" he implies continuing to grow and be "instructed, pulled, and drawn, as it were, into fresh beginnings" (Green, 1984, p. 25). Museums have great stories which can capture and foster our imaginations.

An approach for examining moral aspects of museum practices

Via the above analysis we have attempted to show that museums *are* in the business of shaping conscience; museums very much have a moral dimension. We believe that by having a common framework (such as the one provided by Green) from which to examine the moral dimensions of the educational practices of various institutions, museums will better be able to define their educational missions in a context that takes into account society's need for moral education. With a deeper awareness of the

resources and potential that museums have as sites for the formation of conscience, we hope to bring museums into the greater dialog about community and moral education.

However, identifying a potentially generative framework does not tell us where or how moral dimensions are manifested in museums. Nor does it speak to how museum experiences might relate to individual's moral development. These are issues which deserve further investigation. To conclude this paper, we outline a research agenda to address these issues.

We propose that there are three fundamental questions which need to be investigated:

1. How can one identify the places where moral messages are embedded?
2. How can one characterize the content of these messages?
3. How can one understand the impact of these messages for visitors, the institution, and the community?

To begin to address these questions we have found the hermeneutical approach of John B. Thompson to be helpful. Thompson suggests that all social phenomenon are embedded within a larger context and that to adequately examine a phenomena many aspects of the phenomena and its context must be investigated in a variety of ways. He calls this a "depth-hermeneutical approach" and divides it into three phases: a social-historical analysis, a formal or discursive analysis, and an interpretation/re-interpretation phase (Thompson, 1990). What follows is a description of a research agenda based on Thompson's depth-hermeneutical approach.

I. Places where moral messages are embedded: Social-historical analysis

As Thompson writes, "to analyze social institutions is to reconstruct the clusters of rules, resources and relations which constitute them, to trace their development through time and to examine the practices and attitudes of the individuals who act for them and within them" (Thompson, 1990, p. 282). We are interested in the moral messages embedded within museum practices. How are these produced, propagated and received? What are the relationships among, for example, spaces in museums, museum

publications and exhibitry, and discrete events in museums (e.g. visitor conversations, staff meetings) etc.? Are moral messages being produced, circulated and received via these relationships?

Here are three categories of museum sites and events that could be examined:

A. Specific *spatio-temporal settings* for moral messages' production and reception:

- board meetings
- staff meetings
- museum buildings and grounds
- exhibit spaces: galleries, museum lobbies
- exhibit hall conversations among visitors
- visitors questioning museum staff
- visitors' encounters with specific objects
- visitors' encounters with museum promotional materials

B. *Fields of interaction* within the museum. What are the practices and attitudes of museum players? What positions and 'capital' do these players bring to various situations?

- director - curators
- curators - museum visitors
- museum visitors - museum guards
- exhibit docents - museum visitors
- curators - museum docents
- exhibit developers - museum visitors
- exhibit developers - curators
- museum visitors - museum visitors
- museum visitors - exhibited objects
- museum visitors - exhibit texts

C. *Technical media* which may convey moral messages. What are the constraints and affordances of these media -- Thompson writes, "technical media endow symbolic forms with certain characteristics - with a certain degree of fixation, a certain kind of reproducibility, and a certain scope for participation among the subjects who employ the medium" (Thompson, 1990, p. 283). For example, a museum's annual report may convey very explicitly moral messages regarding "conscience as membership" whereas an exhibit label may not address this voice of conscience at all.

- exhibits
- board meetings' minutes
- annual reports to members
- mission statement
- press kits and marketing materials
- collections acquisition policies
- museum brochures / hand-outs
- newspaper articles
- exhibit brochures / guides
- exhibit labels / taped tours

II. Content of messages: Formal or discursive analysis

Once one has identified some of the contexts for the production, circulation and reception of moral messages in museums, the next step is to look for some kind of internal organization and patterns in the relationships. Thompson calls this phase "formal or discursive analysis" and emphasizes the embedded nature of these patterns, cautioning against allowing this analysis to become "an abstract exercise" (Thompson, 1990, p. 285). Here are several examples of how particular events and objects could be analyzed.

A. Conversation analysis of visitor - docent/museum educator interactions. This type of analysis would look at patterns discourse such as how if turns are taken, who speaks first -- the conversation rules of an exchange.

B. Analysis of the narrative structure of an institution's exhibits -- are there consistent themes and characteristics that constitute an underlying structure?

C. Semiotic analysis of museum graphical and textual materials. In other words, how do symbolic forms a museum produces connect to each other and form a system. For example, what kind of structures can be discerned in the design of the banners for an exhibit or the museum map?

III. Impact on visitor, museum, and community: Interpretation / re-interpretation

Thompson describes the interpretation phase of the depth-hermeneutical approach as proceeding "by synthesis, by the creative construction of possible meaning" (Thompson, 1990, p. 289) which builds upon all the descriptive and analytic work done in the first two phases. We imagine this phase would involve creating a model of how moral messages

are produced and received in a particular institution, or even within a particular exhibit or through the reading of a particular museum brochure.

For example, what are the shared understandings of everyone involved in the development of a particular exhibit? Where are there discrepancies? What is it that visitors do, say, think about what they've experienced in the exhibit? Are there shared understandings here too? How much overlap is there with the understandings of the exhibit developers?

Conclusion

Through the work of Thomas Green and John B. Thompson, we have proposed ways to investigate the moral dimensions of museum practices. We believe that museums generate moral messages as part of their educative role. Although these messages are often implicit in museum's missions and the work of museum practitioners, the ways that museums create these messages -- and the messages themselves -- have not been closely examined. By laying out general categories of moral education, Green's "voices of conscience" provide a basis for conceiving the types of moral messages museums may be expressing. Thompson provides a methodology for identifying, analyzing and interpreting these messages. We hope that these ideas expressed in this paper can be a starting point for further investigations about the role of museums as places for moral education.

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